

## “We Have a Claim on This Estate” Remembering Slavery at Arlington House

**F**our years after his surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House, Robert E. Lee reflected on his beliefs concerning the relationship between slavery and the Civil War. “So far from engaging in a war to perpetuate slavery, I am rejoiced that slavery is abolished. I would cheerfully have lost all that I have lost and have suffered all that I have suffered to have this object obtained.” Contemporary academic historians may question the sincerity of Lee’s statement since most argue that slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War. For public historians, particularly those who work at Civil War sites, any discussion of the war’s causes remains subject to controversy. As Tony Horwitz demonstrated in his bestseller “Confederates in the Attic,” many Americans are obsessed with the “unfinished” Civil War. For them, the meaning and causes of the war remain contested terrain.<sup>1</sup>

Undaunted by sometimes hostile audiences, some Civil War sites have broadened their interpretation to include a discussion of slavery and its relationship to the war. Some critics, however, believe that a more concerted effort is necessary,

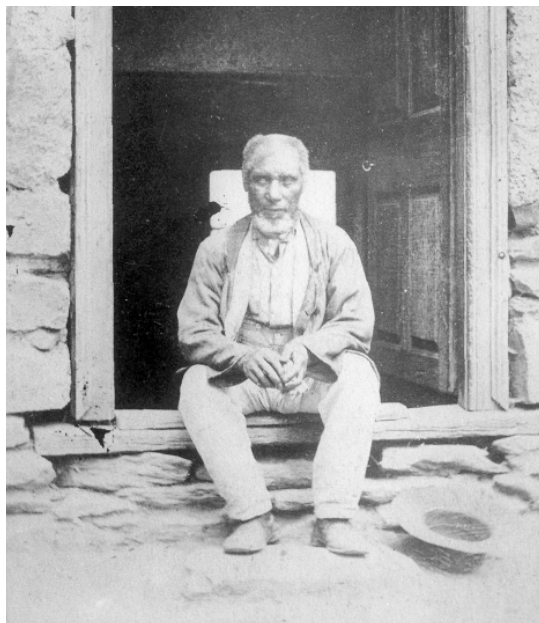
particularly at national parks. U.S. Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-IL) inserted language in the Fiscal Year 2000 National Park Service appropriations bill that directed the Secretary of the Interior “to encourage the NPS managers of Civil War battle sites to recognize and include in all of their public displays and multi-media presentations, the unique role slavery played in causing the Civil War and its role, if any, at the individual battle sites.”

Arlington House, The Robert E. Lee Memorial, a part of the George Washington Memorial Parkway in Virginia, as well as many other national parks, had already begun the difficult task of interpreting the institution of slavery. Although not a battle site, Arlington House was Robert E. Lee’s home for over 30 years, and the 1,100-acre estate functioned as a plantation for over half a century. The National Park Service assumed stewardship of the home in 1933. Slavery has been incorporated into the site’s interpretation for some time — in museum exhibits, brochures, interpretive talks, special events, and most notably in the site’s “Parks As Classrooms” programs for students.

Arlington originally belonged to George Washington Parke Custis, the grandson of Martha Washington. In 1802, Custis left Mount Vernon to establish a new home on the Arlington Estate. Accompanying him were a large number of slaves. Over the next 50 years, these and succeeding generations of slaves would grow crops and raise livestock on the plantation. They made the bricks to build Arlington House and assisted in its construction. House slaves facilitated the gracious hospitality for which Arlington was famous.

In 1857, Custis died without having accomplished his long-term goal of emancipation. Following Custis’ death, Robert E. Lee, Custis’ son-in-law, administered the estate for several years. During the Civil War, Mrs. Lee lost the plantation due to her inability to pay property taxes. Subsequently, the Federal Government purchased the property at a public auction. In

*This wartime photograph shows a former Arlington slave sitting in the doorway of one of the slave quarters.*



1864, a portion of the estate was set aside as a cemetery for war dead.

In 1925, Arlington was designated a national memorial in honor of Robert E. Lee. Congress called for Arlington House, the surviving slave quarters, and grounds to be restored “to the condition in which it existed immediately prior to the Civil War.” Unfortunately, the funding allocated to the National Park Service has never been sufficient to completely restore the site, including the slave quarters. The original restoration of the main house and slave quarters was carried out by the War Department in the 1920s. When Arlington House was acquired in 1933, the National Park Service inherited a flawed restoration that was based more on the popular preservation philosophy of the times than detailed, accurate research. Concern over the questionable restoration of the slave quarters and insufficient funding eventually resulted in the closure of most of the “restored” rooms. Long-term plans call for the quarters to be restored in keeping with their true historical appearance. In 2000, Arlington House received a Save America’s Treasures grant of \$150,000; this amount must be matched with private donations. Once the fundraising is complete, an accurate restoration of the slave quarters will be possible.

This restoration will take several years. In the meantime, a temporary exhibit on slave life at Arlington was placed in the south slave quarters in March 2001. “We Have a Claim on This Estate” is divided into three sections — the first gives an overview of slavery at Arlington before the Civil War and discusses future research endeavors; another discusses the Civil War’s impact on the plantation and the creation of a community of former slaves known as Freedman’s Village; the last section addresses community partnerships that were fundamental in securing the Save America’s Treasures grant and describes how the money will be used.

Analysis of audience comment logs has revealed several distinct themes. The most recurring response has been a genuine hunger for information on a subject so long ignored at some historic sites. Many visitors expressed delight in seeing a tangible recognition of the existence of slavery at a former plantation. “Most restorations completely ignore the role slavery played in the comfortable lives of the plantation owners,” one visitor noted. A woman from Montreal was noticeably moved: “This is my first time on a for-

mer plantation and the exhibit really brought home the cruel realities of the past.” Another stated that “it was great to see an exhibit on the people who really made this place — slaves are usually forgotten.” Many echoed the words of a visitor who observed “This is a very important piece of history. Please continue and expand this exhibit!” These and similar comments indicate that many visitors to plantation sites want a balanced presentation of history that also addresses the lives of those who lived in bondage “in back of the big house.”

African Americans have particularly welcomed the recognition of slavery at Arlington. Of those who identified themselves as African American in the comment logs, the vast majority responded favorably to the exhibit. A local resident believed the exhibit was “a great honor to my ancestors who have been in the area since 1798.” A Pennsylvanian noted, “This is a wonderful homage to our African American heritage. Thanks for paying a service and sincere recognition to our ancestors!” Another visitor commented that the exhibit “filled her with a sense of history.” She viewed it as “an honorable tribute to an unhonorable time in history.” She concluded “I have learned and I feel so many things at this moment as an African American.” The history of Arlington’s slave community provided a sense of inclusiveness for many visitors, such as one who wrote, “As an African American I greatly hunger for my people’s place in American history. Here I felt a sense of belonging and ownership.” Another echoed this sense of belonging: “The exhibit really touched me, and now I know we as African Americans built this country.”

Another distinguishing characteristic of audience response to “We Have A Claim on This Estate” is the emotional volatility that frequently accompanies discussions about slavery at historic sites. Some visitors responded angrily to the exhibit text that described Robert E. Lee as “a more stringent taskmaster than Custis.” This statement resulted in accusations such as “You paint Lee, the well-known opponent of slavery, as being something he was not.” While some audience members resented what they perceived as negative treatment of Lee, others expressed outrage at the “second class” status of the slavery exhibit compared to Arlington House itself. One charged, “This exhibit does not seem to get the respect that others do!” Most critical of all was the angry accusation, “It is interesting to see how



Selina Gray, Jr., and her family lived in the slave quarters behind Arlington House. Her parents, Selina and Thornton Gray, were married in the parlor of Arlington House.

‘they’ still manage to exclude in a small section the history of blacks. It would be nice if for one second those who were enslaved for hundreds of years would receive the credit and honor they deserve.” Many believed that the lack of air conditioning in the slave quarters, the absence of special signs directing them to the exhibit, and the “relegation” of the exhibit to the slave quarters was a deliberate attempt to diminish the history of the enslaved people of Arlington. For some

Americans, slavery remains such a painful issue that any treatment of slave life may seem inadequate.

Careful analysis of the exhibit comment logs also reveals disturbing public perceptions of slavery that should be of serious concern to historians. First is the dangerous misconception that slavery was monolithic in nature. As noted historian James Horton has pointed out, the first task of the public historian is to address the popular ignorance of slavery’s diversity and complexity. Many visitors voiced concern about the living conditions depicted in Selina Gray’s quarters. Gray was the housekeeper at Arlington and a highly favored slave. The period room exhibit contains manufactured furniture, which incensed some visitors. One declared “Furniture in the Gray room does not give a correct picture of slavery at all.” Another angrily accused, “This depiction of slave life is a lie!! Slaves did not live in quarters as depicted in the furnished room! This is revisionist history, not history.” These and similar comments reveal that many people view slavery as a brutally generic condition with no diversity of experience for those who were enslaved. Such assumptions are dangerous for they cast all slaves into the role of faceless victims and render obsolete the personal experiences of individual enslaved people.

Equally disturbing, many comments indicated that some Americans can not associate the

abolition of slavery with the Civil War, or even correctly identify the decade in which slavery ended. One respondent believed slavery still existed in the United States in 1876, and other comments indicate many Americans have no idea when the institution was abolished. Author Tony Horwitz noticed a similar pattern among students who guessed that slavery ended in 1900 or 1940. Clearly much work remains to be done in educating audiences about slavery, both in public and academic settings.<sup>2</sup>

Discussing slavery at historic sites, particularly those associated with the Civil War, remains a daunting task, an “unenviable, yet critically important job” in the words of James Horton. Yet in spite of the many obstacles that encumber conversations about the war and slavery, these dialogues are necessary. The prevailing response to “We Have a Claim on This Estate” indicates that a majority of the public is truly interested in learning about slavery. The staff of Arlington House is committed to telling the story of Arlington’s enslaved community. It is our hope that more of our visitors will be inspired to participate in conversations about the meaning of slavery and its relationship to the war. For as Edward Linenthal, professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, has reminded us, “We honor Civil War ancestors most profoundly when we present them not as stick figures in a comforting reality play, but as complex human beings capable of all the violence, heroism, folly, and contradictory impulses that continue to define the human condition.”<sup>3</sup>

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Douglas Southall Freeman, *R.E. Lee, A Biography Vol. IV* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 401; Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Random House/Pantheon, 1998), 6.
- <sup>2</sup> James Oliver Horton, “Presenting History: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” *The Public Historian* 21:4 (1999):21; Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic*, 372.
- <sup>3</sup> Edward T. Linenthal, “Heritage and History: The Dilemmas of Interpretation,” *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2001), 42.

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Photos courtesy Arlington House Collection, National Park Service.